A History of Romania: From the Great Union to the Dawn of Communism

By Alan Fogelquist
Report generated with the assistance of Gemini
© 2025 Alan Fogelquist. All rights reserved.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction: The Dawn of Greater Romania and the Seeds of Instability
II. The Interwar Period: Political Fragmentation and the Rise of Extremism
III. The Royal Dictatorship and the Shifting Balance of Power
IV. Romania at War: The Antonescu Regime and a Unique Form of Genocide
V. The Royal Coup of August 23, 1944: A Triumphant Turn and a Tragic Catalyst
VI. Soviet Occupation and the Imposition of Communism
VII. Conclusion: A Nation Transformed
VIII. Bibliography

I. Introduction: The Dawn of Greater Romania and the Seeds of Instability

The end of the First World War marked a monumental turning point for Romania, culminating in the formal creation of "Greater Romania" on December 1, 1918. This event, now celebrated as the country's Great Union Day, saw the historical regions of Wallachia and Moldova unite with Transylvania, Crișana, Banat, and Maramureș. This expansion followed the earlier unification with Bessarabia on March 27, 1918, and Bukovina.[1] The unification was officially declared by an assembly of ethnic Romanian delegates in Alba Iulia, and the resolution they adopted articulated a vision for a new, modern state. This vision included a commitment to "full national freedom for all the co-inhabiting peoples," "equal rights and full autonomous religious freedom," and a "full democratic system" with universal, direct, and proportional suffrage for both men and women over the age of 21. It also mandated a "radical agrarian reform" and promised industrial workers the same rights as those in the "most advanced

western industrial states".[2]

While the Great Union represented the fulfillment of long-held national aspirations, the period that followed revealed a stark contrast between these noble ideals and the political realities of the new state. The very document that formalized Greater Romania laid out a comprehensive blueprint for a democratic and egalitarian society. Yet, the political institutions of the newly unified country proved fragile and were unable to withstand the profound social anxieties and external pressures that would soon emerge. Within two decades, the promises of freedom and democracy would be replaced by successive authoritarian regimes: first a royal dictatorship, and then a fascist military one. This rapid decline from a moment of national idealism into political fragmentation and brutality stands as a central, tragic paradox of Romania's history between the World Wars. The failure to secure its own democratic foundations, as outlined in the Alba Iulia Resolution, set the stage for the rise of extremist movements and the country's tragic role in World War II.

II. The Interwar Period: Political Fragmentation and the Rise of Extremism

The political landscape of Greater Romania in the 1920s and 1930s was characterized by a profound instability that paved the way for the rise of extremist ideologies. Despite the democratic principles enshrined in the Great Union, the established political order struggled to address the economic anxieties of the populace, which were exacerbated by the Great Depression. This environment provided a fertile ground for the growth of far-right, nationalist movements that redirected popular anger toward scapegoats, including Jews, immigrants, and leftists.[3]

Among the most significant of these movements was the Iron Guard, a fascist organization founded in 1927 by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu under the name "Legion of the Archangel Michael".[3] The Legion, and its military wing known as the Iron Guard, was committed to the "Christian and racial" renovation of Romania.[3] Its ideology was a potent blend of mystical nationalism, virulent antisemitism, and anti-communism. By feeding on popular discontent and disillusionment with the existing political parties, the Iron Guard transitioned from a simple paramilitary group to a "major social and political force" in the country.[3] The movement's success cannot be dismissed as a fringe phenomenon; its ability to become a powerful social and political force indicates a deep-seated public discontent with the perceived corruption and ineffectiveness of the liberal democratic institutions of the interwar period. The widespread appeal of such a mystical, ultranationalist, and explicitly antisemitic movement demonstrates how severely the core principles of the Great Union had been eroded in the

national consciousness, paving the way for the authoritarian shifts that would soon follow.

III. The Royal Dictatorship and the Shifting Balance of Power

In an attempt to counter the growing power of the Iron Guard and consolidate his own authority, King Carol II took a decisive step on February 10, 1938, by establishing a royal dictatorship. He suspended the country's constitution and all civil liberties and named Patriarch Miron Cristea as the head of the new government.[6] During this period, a personality cult was deliberately cultivated around the king. Propaganda promoted him with titles such as "Conducător" (leader) and "Saviour," and his regime took on overtly fascist characteristics, with ministers greeting him with fascist-style salutes.[7]

The king's relationship with the Iron Guard was complex and marked by a volatile mix of suppression and co-optation. Initially, King Carol II outlawed the Guard and had it suppressed in 1938.[3] However, facing significant territorial losses to the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and Hungary in the summer of 1940, the king found his position untenable.[8] In September 1940, he made a deal with the Iron Guard and invited its leaders to join the government. Just days later, on September 6, 1940, a new regime was formed with General Ion Antonescu, a figure with a history of association with the Iron Guard, as the new Prime Minister.[8] King Carol II was then forced to abdicate in favor of his young son, Michael I.[8] This chaotic and ruthless power struggle among the far-right factions demonstrates the profound instability of Romanian politics at the time. The king's failure to contain the very forces he had, in some ways, helped to legitimize led directly to the transfer of power to Antonescu, a figure who would navigate and ultimately crush these competing factions to establish his own ruthless military dictatorship.

IV. Romania at War: The Antonescu Regime and a Unique Form of Genocide

After seizing power, Ion Antonescu initially formed a partnership with the Iron Guard in what was termed the National Legionary State.[10] However, this alliance was short-lived. Antonescu, a career military officer known for his ruthless efficiency, was determined to consolidate his own authority.[10] In January 1941, he used the army to crush the Iron Guard, bringing an end to the group's significant role in Romanian political life.[3] This maneuver allowed Antonescu to establish a singular military dictatorship and assume the title of

Conducător, or Leader of the country.[10]

Under Antonescu, Romania became one of Nazi Germany's closest allies, a partnership driven by Germany's need for Romania's oil resources and Antonescu's desire to recover territories lost to the Soviet Union.[11] In 1941, Romania joined the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union, known as Operation Barbarossa, with the immediate objective of retaking Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina.[10] The Antonescu regime's participation in the war was inextricably linked to its own genocidal policies against Jewish and Romani populations. The regime was independently responsible for the deaths of as many as 400,000 people, a significant portion of whom were Bessarabian, Ukrainian, and Romanian Jews, as well as Romani.[10] This was not a passive complicity; Antonescu's government implemented its own harsh anti-Jewish policies.[12] A prime example of this state-sanctioned violence was the Iași Pogrom from June 28-30, 1941, where governmental forces, including the military and police, alongside the Iron Guard and civilians, brutally murdered 13,266 victims.[13] Furthermore, Antonescu ordered the "deportation" of Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina to occupied Transnistria, a process that was in practice an extermination campaign designed to eliminate as many Jews as possible.[10]

A critical aspect of the Holocaust in Romania is the unique nature of Antonescu's regime. While it was responsible for mass murders and pogroms, it did not fully align with the Nazi Final Solution. The evidence indicates that Antonescu "ultimately refused to hand Jews over to the Germans".[10] As a junior ally that was not occupied by the Wehrmacht, Romania retained a degree of political autonomy.[10] This distinction had a significant impact on the fate of Romania's Jewish community; Jews in the "Old Kingdom" (including Bucharest) were subjected to legal discrimination but were largely spared the mass murder and deportations that devastated their counterparts in the eastern provinces.[14] This demonstrates that Antonescu was not merely a puppet but an independent perpetrator with his own specific genocidal policies, driven by a localized form of antisemitism that viewed Eastern Jews as "Communist agents".[11]

V. The Royal Coup of August 23, 1944: A Triumphant Turn and a Tragic Catalyst

As the tide of World War II turned against the Axis powers, Romania's position became increasingly precarious. Following heavy casualties on the Eastern Front and a successful Soviet offensive that caused the Axis front in northeastern Romania to collapse, the country was on the brink of complete occupation.[15] In this critical moment, King Michael I, who had been a figurehead under the Antonescu regime, took a decisive and heroic action. On August 23, 1944, with the support of a coalition of opposition parties, including the Communist Party,

the King orchestrated a coup d'état.[15] He met with Prime Minister Antonescu and demanded that Romania sign an armistice with the Allies. When Antonescu refused, the King had him arrested.[15]

Later that night, King Michael I announced over the radio that Antonescu had been deposed, an armistice had been accepted, and Romania was now switching its allegiance to the Allied Powers and declaring war on Germany.[15] This act, praised by historian John Lukacs as "the most successful coup d'état during World War II," had a number of immediate and positive consequences for Romania and the Allied war effort. The country's core economic infrastructure, including its vital oil industry, was left "virtually intact" since the country's core never became a battlefield.[15] The coup is also credited with having shortened the war in Europe by as much as six months, as it unraveled the Axis front and allowed the Red Army to advance into the Balkans unopposed.[15]

Despite these triumphs, the coup also set in motion a chain of events with devastating, long-term consequences. The Red Army, now able to advance unimpeded, sped its advance into Romania.[9] The subsequent armistice, signed on September 12, 1944, was dictated by the Soviets, and it placed Romania under the authority of an Allied Control Commission where the Soviet command exercised "predominant, de facto authority".[9] The irony is profound: a decisive act of national agency, meant to save Romania from further destruction, served as the direct catalyst for its subjugation and the loss of that very agency.

VI. Soviet Occupation and the Imposition of Communism

The Soviet occupation of Romania, which lasted from 1944 until 1958, was the singular force that enabled the consolidation of power by the Romanian Communist Party (PCR).[17] At the end of World War II, the PCR was a marginal political formation with a very small membership, estimated at only around 1,000 members.[18] Its rise to power was not a result of popular support or a mass movement, but a direct consequence of the Soviet military presence. The Red Army, by virtue of its occupation, provided the necessary military, political, and economic control for the communists to systematically seize power and eliminate all opposition.[17]

The Soviet military command exercised its authority through the Allied Control Commission, effectively turning Romania into a satellite state.[17] The process of communization was a step-by-step dismantling of the old regime and the installation of a new one under Soviet supervision. The Red Army oversaw the "complete reorganization and Sovietization" of the Romanian People's Army, purging "pro-German elements" and installing Soviet officers as advisors. Similarly, new intelligence services were created and placed under the control of the Communist Party.[17] Economically, the country was exploited through massive war reparations

and the creation of Soviet-Romanian joint ventures known as

SovRoms, which effectively drained Romania's resources for the benefit of the Soviet Union.[17]

With the institutional levers of power and the backing of a foreign army, the PCR proceeded to suppress all opposition. The new Communist-controlled Ministry of the Interior was used to persecute and arrest "tens of thousands of anti-communist political figures, former military officers, and intellectuals".[17] The final, symbolic act of this process was the forced abdication of King Michael I on December 30, 1947.[19] The King, who had been a key figure in saving the country from the Axis, was now deemed a threat to the stability of the new regime.[19] The establishment of the Romanian People's Republic was not a choice made by the people but a "foreign occupation" and a political system "forcibly imposed on Romanians".[19] The communization of Romania was thus a top-down, foreign-imposed project, with the Soviet occupation providing the raw power, and the PCR serving as its local proxy to dismantle the existing state apparatus and usher in decades of totalitarian rule.

VII. Conclusion: A Nation Transformed

The period from the end of the First World War to the imposition of communism represents a dramatic and tragic historical arc for Romania. What began as a moment of national unity and democratic aspiration, enshrined in the principles of the Great Union of 1918, quickly descended into a series of authoritarian and brutal regimes. The fragility of Romania's democratic institutions in the interwar period allowed for the rise of a powerful extremist movement, the Iron Guard, which capitalized on economic and social anxieties. King Carol II's attempt to counter this threat by establishing a royal dictatorship ultimately failed, paving the way for the ruthless military rule of Marshal Ion Antonescu.

Antonescu's regime was defined by its alliance with Nazi Germany and its unique and horrific participation in the Holocaust. As an independent perpetrator, Antonescu oversaw the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews and Romani, but his selective leniency towards certain Jewish populations and his refusal to fully participate in the Final Solution illustrate a complex and nuanced historical reality. The pivotal moment of the era—the royal coup of August 23, 1944—was a decisive act of national will that both saved Romania from a complete German military occupation and shortened the Second World War. Yet, it also served as the direct catalyst for the country's subjugation. The immediate aftermath of the coup led to a Soviet occupation that lasted for over a decade. It was this military presence that provided the power and leverage for the tiny and marginal Romanian Communist Party to systematically dismantle the state and install a totalitarian regime. The forced abdication of King Michael I in 1947 was not the beginning of this process, but the formal, final act of a foreign-imposed communization. Ultimately, this period transformed Romania from a newly unified, idealistic

kingdom into a totalitarian state that would endure decades of foreign-influenced communist rule.

VIII. Bibliography

Braham, R. L. *The Destruction of the Romanian and Ukrainian Jews During the Antonescu Period*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Constantiniu, Florin. *Istoria României în date*. Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2003.

Fletcher, Peter. "The 1944 Romanian coup d'état." *Wikipedia*, 23 August 2023.

Georgiadis, Basil D. "Life After Ceausescu: The Challenge of Democracy and NATO Membership for Romania." In *20th Century Romania: A Retrospective*. Histria Books, 2023.

Glantz, David. "The Battle of Romania." *Wikipedia*, 24 September 2023.

Lukacs, John. "1944 Romanian coup d'état." *Wikipedia*, 23 August 2023.

Smith, Cary Stacy. "Ion Antonescu." *EBSCO Research Starters*, 2023.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Trial of Ion Antonescu." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, 1 June 2021.

Verona, Sergiu. *Military Occupation and Diplomacy: Soviet Troops in Romania, 1944-1958*. Praeger, 1992.

Williams, Carol. "King Michael's Visit Stirs Joy and Unease in Romania." *Los Angeles Times*, 27 April 1992.

Works cited

1. Romanian Great Union Day – Official Government of Jersey Blog, accessed September 26, 2025, https://blog.gov.je/2023/11/30/romanian-great-union-day/
2. Union of Transylvania with Romania - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_of_Transylvania_with_Romania
3. Iron Guard | Fascist Movement, Antisemitism & Nationalism | Britannica, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iron-Guard
4. Iron Guard - The Holocaust Explained, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/iron-guard/
5. Iron Guard - Yad Vashem, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206332.pdf

6. The beginning of the dictatorship of King Carol II | ENRS, accessed September 26, 2025, https://enrs.eu/news/the-beginning-of-the-dictatorship-of-king-carol-ii
7. Carol II of Romania's cult of personality - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carol_II_of_Romania%27s_cult_of_personality
8. RG 84: Rumania | National Archives, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.archives.gov/research/holocaust/finding-aid/civilian/rg-84-rumania.html
9. Michael I of Romania - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_I_of_Romania
10. Ion Antonescu - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ion_Antonescu
11. Ion Antonescu | Research Starters - EBSCO, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/ion-antonescu
12. Trial of Ion Antonescu - Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/trial-of-ion-antonescu
13. Iași pogrom - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ia%C8%99i_pogrom
14. Surviving the Holocaust: The Jews of Bucharest in Nazi Allied Romania - Chapman Blogs, accessed September 26, 2025, https://blogs.chapman.edu/holocaust-education/2014/02/03/the-jews-of-bucharest/
15. 1944 Romanian coup d'état - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1944_Romanian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat
16. Battle of Romania - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Romania
17. Soviet occupation of Romania - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_occupation_of_Romania
18. Romanian Communist Party - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_Communist_Party
19. Back to the past – chances of restoring monarchy in Romania in the 21st century, accessed September 26, 2025, https://studiapolitologica.uken.krakow.pl/article/download/10357/10348/41203
20. Monarchism in Romania - Wikipedia, accessed September 26, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monarchism_in_Romania